

# On Writing an Old Testament Theology

John Goldingay

## 1 Introduction

I guess it was over twenty years ago that I first formulated the resolution, "I must write an Old Testament Theology one day". After a few years the resolution became "I must write an Old Testament Theology before I die", though friends have protested this formulation because it would imply that once I had completed it, I could give up life on the grounds that my work was done. I decided at the beginning of this year that it was time to start. So since January 1<sup>st</sup> I have been writing 700 words a day and I hope to finish one volume over the next year or so. You can do the math, but the work will produce so many pages that the book will be un-publishable, but this is good because it will force me to winnow out the chaff.

Over the twenty years I accumulated a folder-full of outlines for an Old Testament theology, but I cannot now find these. I may have trashed them along with other things I would not need in California such as commentaries on the New Testament. If I did, this was a prescient gesture, because as far as I remember they were all what might be called systematic Old Testament Theologies in the manner of most of the volumes written in the twentieth century. When I came to think about actually writing, I knew that this would not do. To put it at its lowest, some reviewer might also have reviewed one of my *Models* books and might notice that my method of doing Old Testament theology contradicted the principles I had stated there. When I started writing my *Models* books a decade or so ago, I doubt whether I had heard the word "post-modern", but the two books were on the way to being post-modern ones, and it would not do now to write a *modern* Old Testament Theology. I had left it too late. If I believe that *doctrine* and *interpretation* have to take seriously the diverse forms of scripture (narrative, rule of life, prophecy, prayer...), then I must act as if I believe that *theology* must do so, too.

I realized that my Old Testament Theology must begin with narrative, as the Old Testament itself does. But it cannot stop there. Narrative is something, but it is not everything. In the wisdom books and the Psalms, the Torah and the Prophets, Israel went on to reflect and to worship, to lay down the law and to have dreams and nightmares about the future. In doing that, it produced something more like the kind of statements about God that we think of as theology. Yet again, there is a difference. Interwoven with these statements about who God is are statements about who we are and who we should be and how we should live that we incorporate in studies of ethics, worship, and spirituality. But in the Old Testament, these can more be divorced from theology than theology can be divorced from narrative. So I am thinking about writing a theology comprising three parts:

- Israel's Gospel: Old Testament Theology as Narrative
- Israel's Faith: Old Testament Theology as Belief
- Israel's Life: Old Testament Theology as Ethos

## 2 Old Testament Theology as narrative (a) as gospel

It would not do for a theology to be *wholly* narrative, then, but it would have to have narrative theology as a prominent component. So I decided to start at the beginning of the Bible and attempt to write narrative theology beginning with the creation story. What I wrote at first was essentially a theological midrash, a kind of theological commentary. I retold the story emphasizing its theological significance. But I came to realize that a volume called a *Theology* needed to take at least one step nearer the analytic and the systematizing than that. In the course of writing these first few hundred thousand words I have realized that there are at least three reasons why the First Testament is dominated by narrative.

(It may be that you think I should have worked all this out before starting to write, but I acknowledge that I did not do so. Indeed, I don't think I could have done so. I have to work things out as I go along. I could never draw up a dissertation proposal in advance of writing the dissertation. It is as well that in my day you did not need to do so. In connection with this project, I shall just have to go back to Genesis and rework that material in the light of my realizations.)

The first reason emerges from a feature that the First Testament gospel has in common with the New Testament. The New Testament gospel is that God loved the world so much as to give the one Son God had, so that all who believe in him should not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16). The explicit First Testament gospel is that Yhwh has comforted his people, restored Jerusalem, and bared a holy arm before the nations (Isa 52:7-10, the passage from which the actual expression "good news" or "gospel" comes). Both are part of the biblical gospel, the meta-narrative or overarching narrative that may be inferred from the two Testaments as a whole. That gospel begins at the opening of the First Testament and runs through its story as a whole. It tells how

- God thought
- God blessed
- God started over
- God promised
- God delivered
- God sealed
- God gave
- God accommodated
- God wrestled
- God failed
- God renewed

What makes this a gospel? In a number of ways it might seem not obviously so. The headings recognize failure and conceal stories of rebellion and

expulsion, unfaithfulness and chastisement. But it is often the case that when good news comes, the background is the possibility that there may not be any. The densest concentration of the use of the term “good news” with its literal meaning comes in the story of Absalom’s rebellion. There men vie for the privilege of carrying the good news that the rebellion has been quelled (2 Sam 18:19-32). The background of good news is the threat or the actuality of bad news. This particular narrative also shows that the news itself may be more ambiguous than the messenger realizes, though that is another story. The background of the good news in Isaiah 40–55 is the bad news of rejection, destruction, and exile. The background of the revelation of God’s righteousness in the gospel is the revelation of God’s wrath (Rom 1:16-18).

The good news is that bad news has neither the last word nor the first word. It is set in the context of a purpose to bless that goes back to the Beginning, and a purpose to create that persists to the End.

### (b) as concrete

So First Testament theology has to be shaped by narrative because the nature of its theology is to be a statement about God’s involvement in a particular sequence of events in the world. But the First Testament’s narrative is far longer than it needs to be in order simply to expound the significance of this sequence of events. It is discursive and prolix in nature. And it does not merely give a lengthy and relaxed account of its gospel story: it is uneven in its discursiveness. It gives so much more space to the account of the building of the tabernacle than it gives to the life of Isaac. The nature of this discursive narrative suggests two further significances that attach to its narrative form.

The stories of Abraham and Sarah, Jacob and his wives, or Joseph and his brothers, or the stories of Saul and David, illustrate one form of this discursiveness. They portray the specificity of human beings living with God. They are stories about people facing the challenges, potentials, questions, achievements, ambiguities, puzzles, disappointments, demands, and failures that are intrinsic to our lives with God. They thus invite us to reflect on the equivalent specificities of our own lives and in doing so to utilize the framework of their own implicit convictions about who God is and what human life is. Such reflection needs the help of narrative with its concreteness and specificity. By their nature the direct and unambiguous affirmations of teachers, prophets, philosophers, and systematic theologians cannot provide the means for reflection that appear in narrative. Nor can they have the authority that attaches to such narrative. The kind of claims that the First Testament implies about what it means to live before God cannot be made without the kind of specific and concrete portrayal that books such as Genesis and 1 and 2 Samuel make possible.

Wisdom indeed requires the direct and unambiguous affirmations of teachers, prophets, philosophers, and systematic theologians. Such affirmations on the part of teachers and prophets provide the implicit theological framework for the First Testament’s narratives. They are the framework that the storytellers took for granted, or that the people who

came to treat their works as scripture took for granted that they took for granted. Occasionally it is explicit that they are the framework that the participants in the narrative themselves are assumed to take for granted: so Abraham is expected to (17:1) and so Yhwh does (Exod 34:6-7). But they are subordinate to the narrative, and they require the narrative to give them their meaning. Exodus 34:6-7 is a wondrous statement of the First Testament's systematic theology, but it would die without its narrative. Genesis 17:1 is a fine description of life with God, but it would die without the specific of narrative (and rule of life, in the Torah).

In the First Testament as a whole, the fact that narrative precedes the direct affirmations of prophets and teachers may even imply that "the particular is in some sense prior to general rules and principles".<sup>1</sup> Exodus 34:6-7 then constitutes a systematic theological reflection on the narrative that begins in Exodus 32. Nor is the particular merely a means to the end of making general rules and principles, so that once the particular has yielded the generalization, it can be left aside. If anything, the opposite is the case. A framework is essential to a building and a skeleton to a person, and a frame may be an asset to a painting, but we concentrate on paintings not on frames, on bodies not on skeletons, on buildings not on frameworks. The particular is posterior to the general as well as prior to it. It is striking that in its Hebrew order the First Testament ends in narrative (Esther, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, Chronicles) as well as beginning in narrative. In the chapters I am writing, I combine narrative reflection with systematic reflection, the particular with the general, but the usefulness of the chapters will hang on whether they take the readers back to the narrative particularities of the First Testament and of their own lives.

### (c) as handling complexity and mystery

The other significance of the First Testament narrative's discursiveness emerges from a consideration of its treatment of the story of Israel itself. Like the Israelites' own story, the First Testament's telling of that story does not take the most direct route from A to B. The account of Israel's deliverance from Egypt, for instance, sometimes proceeds quite briskly (e.g., in the account of the people's journey from Egypt to the Red Sea). But sometimes it gives us a much more detailed account of events: for instance, the main story line does not actually require the account of Moses' signs and portents in Egypt and the closing of the king's mind.

Much human interest attaches to these stories; but then, much human interest could have attached to the account of the journey from Egypt to the Red Sea. The stories of Moses' signs and portents provide a narrative discussion of theological issues that do not exclusively relate to the once-for-all sequence of events that take Israel from Egypt to Sinai. In particular, narrative makes it easier to discuss a complicated issue such as the interrelationship between divine sovereignty and human freewill, particularly an issue that seems to require us to make a number of

---

<sup>1</sup> Martha Nussbaum's comments regarding the novel in *Love's Knowledge* 165; see also 139 and elsewhere in the book. The following paragraph similarly adapts comments on pages 141-45.

apparently conflicting statements. The account of events at Sinai in Exodus 32–34 brings that use of narrative to its apogee, not least because it uses it simultaneously to explore two such issues. One is the question what we mean by talking of the presence of God with us. The other is the question what stance God takes to the sin of the people of God. Narrative enables scripture to make the variety of statements that need to be made about such questions. The other end of the Sinai story, Numbers 1–10, suggests a suggestive sequence of models for understanding the nature of the people of God—it appears as a family, an assembly, an organization, an army, a congregation, a hierarchy, a cult, a whole, and a movement. As is commonly the case, setting a number of models alongside each other enables them to enrich, modify, expand, explain, and correct each other. Numbers 1–10 offers a narrative ecclesiology.

I now see that not only would I never have satisfied the CATS Committee with a proposal for this project. I had even forgotten a point that was implicit in a paper on Daniel that I read to the colloquium last year. Different narratives tend to raise specific theological (and ethical) questions, so that an appropriate task for a narrative Old Testament Theology is to seek to identify the questions a narrative handles and to tease out their significance. And it is the complexity of these questions that makes narrative an appropriate or even a necessary means of discussing them.

In lecturing on Exodus 32–34, I suggest to students that they form (among other things) a piece of narrative theological exposition concerning the question how we may talk about the presence of God. What do we mean by talking about the presence of God with us or about being in the presence of God? In worship we often sing about a desire to see God: what do we mean? In the course of the story and of Moses' conversations with God, the narrative tries out a whole series of ways of talking about the presence of God—the person of Yhwh's aide, the tent, God's face, God's splendor, God's goodness.... The question of God's presence is a complex one, difficult to discuss conceptually. Readers of Exodus 32–34 often fret at aspects of the text that look like contradiction. Is Yhwh present on the mountain and therefore accessible, or does Yhwh come down there to meet with people, so that they are protected from a presence that would be too dangerous? Does Yhwh take the initiative in such meetings, or may people do so? The genius of narrative is that it can set alongside each other vignettes that express different partial insights. That is the way it does theology, and writing an Old Testament Theology means teasing out the way it does so and the contribution it makes to our understanding of the question it is handling. I had forgotten this insight, or failed to realize its implications for the wider task of narrative theological interpretation.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> I suggest that this understanding of the nature of Exodus 32–34 provides an alternative way to a critical understanding of them. Interpreters have long been troubled by the jerkiness of the chapters and by the tensions within them. Historical criticism naturally sought to explain this source-critically, but this has not produced an agreed solution. The literary or canonical approach of Brevard Childs or Terence Fretheim sought to provide an alternative understanding of why the chapters are as they are, but it often seems a *tour de force*. I suggest that we view the unevennesses in the narrative as a sign of its strength not of its weakness, and as a feature to be reflected on rather than explained away.

In the course of thinking about Exodus 32–34, I realized that the nature of the presence of God was not the only question that the chapters discuss. Interwoven with it in Exodus 32–34 is another, related question, the question how God is to handle the rebelliousness of the people. What stance is Yhwh to take to that? What does the sin and the stance imply about the ultimate basis and security of the people's relationship with God? Is Yhwh to act as if in wrath, in order to destroy the people? But that is impossible because it accepts failure to fulfil a project and involves failing to keep a commitment that was not dependent on a human response. Does rebelliousness mean that God's people surrender possession of God's affirmations? Can Yhwh simply forget about the rebelliousness and carry on as if nothing had happened? Can Yhwh start over? What is the relationship within Yhwh between grace and mercy, and the willingness to punish? Should Yhwh withdraw from a close association with the people? Should God's people be cut down? If so, should this happen in a way that reflects the deserves of the individuals who pay the price? What should a human being do when faced with the rebelliousness of God's people and the peril this puts them in? Pray courageously is one answer. Shatter the object that expresses the rebellion and make the people choke on it is another. Look for their sorrow and change is another. Should one seek to atone for the wrongdoing? But God sees no logic in letting one person atone for the sins of others. These questions are not the kind that have universalizable answers. They are questions one lives with rather than answering and then moving on.

One of the motifs of Greek tragedy and Greek philosophy is the fact that we are sometimes torn between two different ethical commitments, both of them making legitimate demands upon us.<sup>3</sup> Ancient and modern philosophy has often sought to remove the sting from this experience on the basis of the conviction that in any situation there must actually be one finally-binding demand. It must be possible to resolve "Euthyphro's dilemma".<sup>4</sup> There is such a thing as the right action. Yet even if this is true, it does not take away from the reality and the sadness of our having to do the "lesser evil", of the fact that we cannot avoid doing something wrong.

The First Testament incorporates no tragic human stories like those of Agamemnon or Cleon or Antigone faced with such ethical choices, but it does portray God in ways that recall such stories. A particular theological factor may account for both the absence of the human stories and the astonishment of the divine story. It is the fact that Yhwh is the only God in the First Testament. Agamemnon's dilemma involved deciding whether to obey Zeus or Artemis; such a question cannot arise in the First Testament (Socrates, too, sought to resolve Euthyphro's dilemma by declaring as obligatory only the duties on which all the gods agree). The moment in the First Testament when we may feel it ought to arise is the moment when Abraham is bidden to sacrifice Isaac, but it does not do so because the entirety of deity bids the act.<sup>5</sup> The only tension that could arise is one between the divine will and the human will.

<sup>3</sup> See esp. Martha Nussbaum's *The Fragility of Goodness*.

<sup>4</sup> Euthyphro's father was responsible for a foreign servant's death; Euthyphro ought to press charges out of his obligation to the defenseless servant, but ought not to do so out of his filial obligation to his father.

The fact that Yhwh alone is God also means that this God can and does feel tensions that human beings do *not* have reason to feel. There are a number of occasions when the First Testament story overtly reflects this dynamic, and a number of others where it is unmentioned but where I suggest it helps us to understand why the story works the way it does. It is overt when the First Testament refers to God having a change of mind, in response to prayer or to other events on the human plane. It is also overt when the First Testament explicitly speaks of contending priorities within God. The clearest instance is Hosea 11, while another is the reference to wrath as God's "alien" work in Isaiah 28:21. These in turn link with the two-sided nature of Yhwh's self-characterization in Exodus 34:6-7, taken up in other passages in the First Testament. In turn that links with the story of Abraham's arguing with God in Genesis 18 in the way we rather think he should subsequently do in Genesis 22.

### 3 The narrative of beginnings: (a) God birthed

So I set off on a theological exposition of the First Testament, beginning with the creation story. The First Testament may seem implicitly to invite us to read Genesis 1—2 as *the* biblical account of creation. If that is so, it later issues a further invitation that deconstructs the first when it gives much more space to accounts of creation in the Wisdom Books, Psalms, and the Prophets. In general, theological understanding has accepted the first invitation but not the second. It has perceived that there is actually more than one complementary perspective on the creation process within Genesis 1—2, without noticing the much more horizon-broadening perspectives on the creation process that feature in those other books. It has buttressed the beguiling that is offered by the fact that Genesis 1—2 comes first by emphasizing the way in which the subsequent material takes middle-eastern myth as its starting-point and uses its images as a way to speak of Yhwh's involvement with the world. These may not be myths, but they use mythic motifs.

Implicitly they thus contrast with a more literal presentation in Genesis. There is a hangover here of the assumption that Genesis 1—2 provides us with a historical account of the process whereby God brought the world into being. There are no grounds for thinking that this is so. I do not think that God actually created the world over a six-day period and then had a day off. God did not create the first human being by taking some dirt and shaping it into something that had the external form of a man and then do mouth-to-mouth on it. God did not create the second human being by giving the first an anaesthetic and taking a part of its body to build up another from it. These are no more historical statements than the declaration that God cut Rahab into pieces or pierced the dragon (Isa 51:9). Genesis as much as Isaiah 51 is a divinely inspired metaphorical or parabolic statement. It gives us true information about the process of creation—for instance, that it presupposed the existence of some raw material and that it was orderly and careful and reflective. But it does not give us information

---

<sup>5</sup> Jewish midrash did imagine Satan tempting Job to disobey God. Modern midrash is more inclined to see Satan as the inspiration of Abraham's act.

that opens up the possibility of reconstructing the kind of actual historical picture that a camcorder would have captured if it had been there. In this respect the prose of Genesis 1–2 and the poetry of other books has similar status. As the former has been theology’s default source for an understanding of *the* First Testament perspective on creation, I thought I would start more from the second.

The most far-reaching statement the other books make appears in Psalm 90, which almost begins with the declaration that *before mountains were birthed or you labored with earth and world, even from age to age you were/are/will be God*. In several respects it is an extraordinary statement about God and about the world with which to begin our reflection on the gospel. First, the image it suggests for creation is that of giving birth.<sup>6</sup> Books sometimes declare that of course the First Testament does not speak of creation as giving birth, as other middle-eastern writings do. It thus transpires that this statement joins many other failed attempts to set the First Testament off from these other works. The boundaries usually turn out to be permeable. Yes, God gave birth to the world. Of course it is a metaphor, but then so are statements such as “God shaped” or “God spoke”—or “God created”. It would be better to say that it is the language of analogy. It is an image that tells us something true about God’s relationship with the world, though like all others we have to set it in the context of other images. Only then can we infer wherein it gives us true information and wherein we should not take it too far.

First, birthing suggests wondrous mystery. It is amazing that a fully-alive being emerges from the body of its mother. It is extraordinary that mountains should exist: human beings stand before their majesty amazed. The previous psalm has made the point that north and south, Tabor and Hermon, belong to Yhwh and resound at Yhwh’s name because Yhwh created them (89:12 [13]).<sup>7</sup> Perhaps I look to the mountains because they frighten me or perhaps because they encourage me (121:1): either way I testify to their impressiveness.

Second, birthing suggests pain. God labored to bring them forth. Labor pains did not begin after the first human act of disobedience. Long before that, they were part of God’s experience in bringing the world to birth. It was a tough business. It is not surprising that God wanted a day off at the end of it.

The idea of God laboring is too much for many translations, often a sign that the First Testament is saying something interesting.<sup>8</sup> Such

---

<sup>6</sup> The same will be true of the Genesis description of the process of creation as “the generations of the heavens and the earth” (2:4), if the genitive is objective, in contrast to the regular usage of that phrase. It then refers to the process whereby they were generated rather than the process whereby they generated the rest of creation.

<sup>7</sup> Hermon is a great mountain to the far northeast, visible for miles in Israel. Even little Tabor stands out attractively and impressively from the surrounding countryside. That would be enough to make recollection of them something that brought glory to Yhwh as their creator. But “north” is Şaphon, another great holy mount, and “south” may conceal the name of yet another.

<sup>8</sup> The text reads unequivocally “you labored with” (*wattecholel*), using the verb *chul* that most often refers to the twisting and writhing involved in giving birth (it can also denote dancing or whirling). But the Septuagint and other early translations



alteration and watering down of the text may reflect a desire to protect God's transcendence. The First Testament offers much evidence that this is not a desire that God shares, but human beings often prefer their God safely transcendent. Perhaps Yhwh is rather unsafely transcendent, for paradoxically the point about the description of God in Psalm 90 is to underline that truth about God. Before bringing the world to birth so extraordinarily and so painfully, the Lord (unusually, Hebrew actually uses this word, '*adonay*') had always been God (the word '*e*'). And the Lord always would be God. The Hebrew statement is a "noun clause", simply "from age to age you God". While Hebrew's characteristic stress on verbal statements fits with the predominant narrative nature of its theology, this syntactical form facilitates Hebrew also making statements that contain no time reference.

Hebrew lacks abstract expressions such as "eternal" or "eternity", but the lack of particular words is never necessarily an indication that the people who use the language in question do not utilize the concepts that would be signified by such words. The Hebrew word '*olam*' denotes "age" and in isolation *le'olam* need not mean "for ever". But the statement that before the world came into being "from age to age you are God" looks an unequivocal statement of Yhwh's eternity. Marduk became top god only just before bringing the world into being. Yhwh's being God does not relate to bringing the world into being. Yhwh simply is God. The First Testament gospel story has a setting in the story of God, but we do not know how long the story of God had been proceeding before this gospel story began. Before that, God simply is/was/would be.

The First Testament does not suggest that God created time, whatever that would mean. Neither does it exclude this possibility, though it perhaps rather implies that time is intrinsic to God's being. Arguably time is intrinsic to being a person. It is then difficult to see how God could be a person and not be living in time, even if also in some ways able to transcend the limitations of time. We will see that the First Testament certainly portrays God as living with people in time. To describe Yhwh as being God from age to age seems to presuppose that God indeed lives in time without being limited to particular times.

In this sense, the psalm's statement of God's eternity is less of a theological abstraction than translations such as "from everlasting to everlasting you are God". Its point is also not to offer a timeless theological abstraction. Like other statements about God's creation of the world that we will consider, it has a barb to it. Yhwh is supposed to be God from age to age. Thus the Lord has been a dwelling-place or refuge (there are two traditions) for Israel in every generation (90:1). So why are things working out the way they are in Israel's current experience? (90:7-15). The psalm is an appeal to Yhwh to behave like the God who is supposed to exist from age to age and to have wondrously birthed the mountains and painfully labored over earth and world. It is regularly the case that stories about creation

---

have the passive "it [the earth] was brought forth", which implies only a minutely different Hebrew (*wattecholal*). That leaves nicely unclarified who was the mother who did this birthing (cf Job 38:8). KJV and NRSV apparently follow the Masoretic Hebrew but water down the metaphor to "you formed".

(like stories about the future) are told because of the way they relate to life in the present. They do not merely satisfy intellectual curiosity.

(b) God thought (and laughed)

Psalm 90 thus offers a different way of thinking about the way God brought the world into being. But what happened before God did that? What happened before Genesis 1 and Psalm 90?

Proverbs and Job emphasize that God thought hard about it, which is perhaps as well given the problems that the decision was going to bring (I guess it is like thinking hard before you move 6000 miles). Job 28 tells us that. It describes God as making sure of finding the way to wisdom, and implies that the evidence and the fruit of God's doing so is the nature of creation. If we may press the analogy with mining whose language the poet picks up in the talk of exploration, God is like "an individual who has discovered a precious jewel".<sup>9</sup> In this connection "creation was thus a great adventure for God".<sup>10</sup>

Proverbs 8 crowns its attempt to convince people that they should pay attention to wisdom by pointing out that before setting about the task of creating the world, God made sure of possessing the wisdom to do so. Wisdom speaks.

22 *Yhwh had me at the start of his way, the beginning of his acts long ago.*  
 23 *I was appointed of old, at the first, before the beginnings of earth.*  
 24 *When there were no depths I was birthed, when there were no springs heavy with water.*  
 25 *Before mountains were sunk, prior to hills, I was birthed,.*  
 26 *when he had not made earth and open country, and the first of all the soil in the world.*  
 27 *When he established the heavens, I was there, when he drew a circle on the face of the deep,*  
 28 *when he firmed the skies above when the springs of the deep were strong,*  
 29 *when he laid down his decree for the sea so that the waters would not transgress his word,*  
*when he drew up the foundations of the earth, 30 I was there, a child at his side.*  
*I was there, full of delight day by day, rejoicing before him every moment,*  
 31 *rejoicing in his inhabited world and full of delight in human beings.*

If the cosmos was birthed, so was the wisdom that made it possible. And if the cosmos was birthed, it was also built. According to NRSV and NIV, Ms Wisdom herself acts as master worker in the process of creation, but this understanding of the enigmatic word 'amon in v. 30 (translated "child" in the version above) ill fits the context. Ms Wisdom's activity is joying and

<sup>9</sup> Norman C. Habel, *The Book of Job* (OTL, 1985).

<sup>10</sup> John E. Hartley, *Job* (NICOT, 1988).

delighting, not making.<sup>11</sup> There is a master worker in Proverbs 8. It is Yhwh. Yhwh is the one who marks out plans and lays foundations and makes sure that the whole is a structure that will stand the natural forces that might threaten to tear it down.

Behind the words God uttered to bring the world into being (Gen 1) was the wisdom God possessed that made that possible. Creation was not merely an expression of power but of insight. "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth", Genesis says. "And I was there," adds Ms Wisdom, "and I will tell you about a 'beginning' before that".<sup>12</sup> The First Testament assumes that there is only one being who is really entitled to be described as "God". But it can picture aspects of the one God as so distinguishable from God's own being that they almost seem to exist in their own right, and so it is here. God was not austere alone in the act of creation.

Proverbs 8 takes us back to the time when there were no depths and no springs abounding with water issuing from the depths. There is no indication in Genesis 1 that God started from scratch in creating the world. Genesis presupposes the existence of the raw material for creation. It is not concerned with the question of the origin of this raw material. But Proverbs 8 does go behind that. Its concern, of course, no more corresponds to ours than Genesis's concern does. It wants to glorify wisdom. But its concern to do that happens to generate an assertion that satisfies the modern interest in where the raw material came from. Unlike the Babylonian creation story *When on High*, it thinks back to a time when there was no matter, no raw material out of which the world might be created, and it then declares that God's being antedates that—rather than postdating it, like the Babylonian gods.

At the very beginning of the course of action that would lead to the creation of the world, Yhwh had wisdom (8:22), and Ms Wisdom gives us her testimony about that. When she speaks of herself and of her relationship with Yhwh, she often does so in an ambiguous and allusive fashion, using words that can be understood in several ways. When she tells us that Yhwh "had" her, the verb is *qanah*. It is the verb that Eve uses to describe her "having" her first child,<sup>13</sup> the verb that Melchizedek and Abraham use to describe God as "owner" of heaven and earth (Gen 14:19, 22). The Septuagint translates *qanah* "create" in Genesis 14 and in Proverbs 8.<sup>14</sup> Actually it is doubtful if *qanah* ever means "create". It would in any case be odd to think of wisdom being "created", whether by God or for God.<sup>15</sup> If we

<sup>11</sup> Cf William Brown, *The Ethos of the Cosmos* 274.

<sup>12</sup> I imagine such conversations. I do not know for sure that historically Proverbs 8 followed Genesis 1 or that it was consciously taking up its language. Rather I take up the fact that these two books eventually became part of one set of scriptures.

<sup>13</sup> The verb enables her to make a link with his name *qayin*, Cain (Gen 4:1).

<sup>14</sup> This produced an amusing moment in the history of Christian theological debate. Paul had already seen Christ, God's Son, as the embodiment of God's Wisdom, and on the basis of the Septuagint translation of Proverbs 8 the Arians were able to argue that the Bible describes God as having created Wisdom. So the Son is a created being. It shows the need to read Hebrew if you want to do systematic theology.

<sup>15</sup> Gerhard von Rad avoids this problem by having God create wisdom in the world as a structured rational orderliness that underlies the nascent creation and speaks

think of God “acquiring” wisdom, the church fathers would doubtless be able to argue that this was an “eternal” acquisition like the eternal generation of the Son of God. More likely we should then simply not press the image. Proverbs’ point is that God made sure of having the help of wisdom before creating the world. Human beings will therefore be well-advised to make sure of that for themselves before undertaking their more trivial tasks.

The range of meanings that might be conveyed by *qanah* (create, acquire, possess, birth) is paralleled by the range of meanings that might be conveyed by some of the other words that follow. “I was appointed” (v. 23, NIV). The verb is *nasak*; there is probably more than one verb with this spelling. Usage elsewhere might thus invite us to imagine Wisdom as being installed like a king (cf Ps 2:6), or poured out like a cast image (cf Isa 44:10), or poured out like a drink (cf Isa 29:10), or woven like a blanket (cf Isa 25:7)—or like a baby in the womb (cf Ps 139:13). It was then that “I was birthed”, Wisdom indeed goes on to say (Prov 8:24, 25). The verb is now *chul*, a bold word, suggesting the contortion involved in giving birth. Whether or not Wisdom was eternally generated, she was brought to birth before the events described in Genesis 1, and before the events not described in Genesis 1 such as the preparatory work for the act of creation. We have imagined the world coming into being in a way that resembles birth. God is the world’s mother or father. But before that, Wisdom was God’s daughter.

At the other end of her testimony Ms Wisdom describes herself as standing by Yhwh’s side during the work of creation, as a *’amon* (according to most of the manuscripts) or a *’amun* (according to the Aleppo Codex). These might suggest she is a craftworker or artist (cf Cant 7:2), or someone who is faithful (cf 2 Sam 20:19), or most likely a child brought up by someone who cares (cf Lam 4:5).

In whatever capacity, she is there. “I was there”, she says twice, anticipating Yhwh’s own repeated *’ehyeh* in the revelation to Moses, “I will be there with you”, “I am what I am”/“I will be what I will be”, “‘I am there’ has sent me to you” (Exod 3:12-14).<sup>16</sup> But what she says about her presence takes her point in a whole new direction. So far her claim has been rather serious. She has agreed with other creation accounts in the First Testament that creation is a serious business, as it obviously is. This is especially so when we are concerned that threatening forces within the cosmos should be under good control and the physical bases of the world be securely founded.

As Ms Wisdom’s words unfold, there develops something paradoxical or subtle, or perhaps teasing and playful—given that she will in due course explicitly own her playfulness. Why did the sky need to be made firm?

---

to human beings, inviting them to believe in an order in their lives (see *Wisdom in Israel*, pp. 153-57). But this seems to underplay the emphasis on Wisdom’s existing before any of the primeval realities from which the cosmos was made. In addition, it loosens the link of the passage with its context, which argues that people should take Wisdom seriously and make sure they possess it. Verses 22-31 buttress that argument by declaring that God set an example in possessing wisdom and taking it seriously (as well as joyfully, we shall see). If the wisdom the verses describe is created within the cosmos, the argument of the chapter seems not to work. The wisdom is one God possesses.

<sup>16</sup> Roland E. Murphy, *Proverbs*. Ms Wisdom’s pointed (and unnecessary) use of this quasi-divine *’ehyeh* is another indicator that she is an aspect of God rather than an aspect of the world.

Because the springs of the deep are strong.<sup>17</sup> They would need some restraining. The sea will need to have a limit decreed for it lest it overwhelm the world.<sup>18</sup> There is no presupposition that it will gladly obey Yhwh's command. In the light of the way Ms Wisdom's words are unfolding, their opening also looks more somber. The fact that the springs are heavy with water seems more threatening. The need for the mountains and hills to be sunk on deep foundations makes one ask what cosmic earthquake is expected to threaten them.

Ms Wisdom knows about the forces that will threaten creation, but at this point she intends not to be put off by them. In gradually making us face the fact of these forces' existence, or gradually making clear that she is not at all blind to them, she has not told us where lies her special interest in creation. That has a quite other focus. She has played a double rhetorical trick on us. First, it transpires that she wants us to see creation as more threatening than we first realize. Then, it transpires that she does not want us to see it as threatening at all. For she was there at creation, she says, and she was full of delight (*sha'ashu'im*, literally "[as] delights")—full of delight in her own being, or full of delight to Yhwh. And she was playing or laughing or joking or having fun (the verb *sachaq*) all the time before Yhwh during the process of creation.

The talk of delight and fun initially brings us up short, but it may have two links with the context. First, "delight" appears most often in the First Testament as an attitude to God's instructions.<sup>19</sup> Whereas commands or statutes may seem to us limiting and restrictive, externally-imposed restraints on freedom, the First Testament sees them as protective, liberating, and offering entry to wise living. Ms Wisdom assumes that this applies to the statutes that Yhwh lays down for creation (v. 29). They are designed to keep the elements of creation in their place and thereby free them to be what Yhwh designs and what will form part of a whole. No wonder Ms Wisdom delights in what Yhwh does.

Another context of "delight" is the relationship of a parent and child, parent delighting in child (Jer 31:20), child playing on its mother's knee (Isa 66:12), and I have reckoned that the description of Ms Wisdom as *'amon* designates her as a child. Childhood is also of course a common context of fun and play (*sachaq/tsachaq*) (Zech 8:5, and commonly in the Isaac story). Here Wisdom plays in or with the world God has created. It has become her playground or her playhouse.<sup>20</sup> Again, fixed framework and relaxedness complement each other: within the circumscribed and ordered creation, relaxed and playful life is possible. In the light of all that, the sages' hearers can take the risk of attending to wisdom, knowing that this is the way to life,

<sup>17</sup> For MT *ba'azuz* (when they were strong) LXX apparently read *be'azzezo* (when he strengthened). This expresses the fine conviction that Yhwh is the origin of the fabled self-assertive power of the deep. It can hardly denote that Yhwh "stabilized" the deep (Brown, *The Ethos of the Cosmos* 273).

<sup>18</sup> Whether we translate *hoq* "limit" or "decree", the context (cf the parallelism with "his command") suggests that the suffix refers to Yhwh who lays it down not to the sea that is bound by it: cf Job 38:10 rather than 14:5.

<sup>19</sup> See esp. Ps 119.

<sup>20</sup> Brown, *The Ethos of Creation* 276-77.

not to death (vv. 32-36). "As reciprocal virtues of moral conduct, play and discipline (*mûsâr*) are the warp and woof of Wisdom's ethos."<sup>21</sup>

Ms Wisdom's delighted play "day by day" recalls the picture in Genesis 1 of God spending a working week over bringing the world into being. Each of those six days that Genesis counts off, Ms Wisdom was jumping and clapping at her father's side as she watched God bring something new into being. God, too, evidently gained satisfaction out of contemplating the result of each day's work and reflecting, "That's good", and at the end, "That's very good", and perhaps spends part of the subsequent day's rest enjoying the sense of a job well done. Ms Wisdom's enthusiasm is less restrained. But then she, too, was full of delight at the end product, at the complete world that Yhwh had formed. She has owned the objective facts of creation, the scientific facts if you will, and she has owned the dangerous facts about it, but she has done that only to prepare the way for the affective facts about it.

She was also full of delight in the human race, or full of delight to it. The reference to humanity constitutes yet another surprise as Ms Wisdom plays with us through vv. 22-31. One effect of it is to undergird the argument that the whole passage supports. Proverbs wants human beings to delight in wisdom, and portraying wisdom delighting in human beings may encourage that. In Genesis 1 and in *When on High*, the creation of humanity comes at the end of the story, so there is an appropriateness about its coming at the end of this recollection of creation. If she also hints that she was full of delight to humanity at the Beginning, there is further irony. One way of expressing the point of Genesis 2—3 would be to say that humanity preferred folly to wisdom when it was overcome by the cleverness of a creature that encouraged it to seek knowledge by a route that Yhwh had forbidden.

Proverbs itself does not quite make explicit that God was drawn into Ms Wisdom's rejoicing and laughter in the act of creation, though it inevitably implies it. Thus the Septuagint assumes that Ms Wisdom is a delight to God in 8:30 (cf NRSV) and not merely one who is delighted in her own self. Laughter is infectious, and if Ms Wisdom laughs, then it is hard for God to withhold a smile, particularly given that God's wisdom is actually part of God. Her laughter would soon be echoed in the harmonious resounding of Venus and Mercury, the stars that appear just before morning, and the roaring shout of the heavenly beings, as they applaud the founding of the world (Job 38:7).

So Ms Wisdom's testimony takes us behind creation and sets off the gospel story by telling us that creation involved God thinking and laughing. It does not tell us *what* God thought, why God decided to create the world. It implies that God's thinking was more concerned with the "how" than the "why". Careful thought and practical planning lay behind the powerful and systematic words that bring the world into being and the hands-on activity that shaped the first human beings and the animals and that planted the garden. And when God looked at each day's work and liked the look of it, this involved more than a silent smile of satisfaction. Or if God's response was just a smile, God's wisdom responded with a laugh and a dance of joy.

---

<sup>21</sup> Brown, *The Ethos of Creation* 283.

The creation was such as to draw forth a cry of wonder, a leap of appreciation, a guffaw of amusement, a dance of delight.

### (c) God battled and gained control

It is a common human experience that creative achievement sometimes emerges only out of conflict. Growth in a relationship may come about because two people have a fight with each other. Innovative ideas for new activities and novel solutions to old problems may emerge from hard-fought arguments in committees or boards. Social and communal renewal may issue from the determined opposition and resistance of one party to another, as happened once when Israel provoked a conflict with Egypt and has happened recently in South Africa. The growth of an individual may come about through a process of internal conflict in which inner forces struggle with one another. In each case, it is difficult to see how there would have been creativity and growth without argument, struggle, and conflict. Like anger, argument, struggle, and conflict are not inherently negatives. Only on a case-by-case basis can we discern whether a particular season of peace or of conflict is a good moment or a questionable one.

This common human experience fits the way the First Testament depicts God as involved in conflict in connection with creation. In Proverbs and in Genesis, the world comes into being by a thoughtful, rational, controlled process, as is the case in some creation stories outside the First Testament. In other creation stories, creation issues out of conflict, and the First Testament also talks about God's involvement in conflict with supernatural powers, though it is often allusive over whether this had any relationship with the act of creation.<sup>22</sup> But Psalm 74 does set these events in narrative sequence as it describes God as one who crushed Leviathan, put the planets in place, and established the seasons. Isaiah 51:9-11 and Psalm 89:8-14 do something similar. Such passages affirm that creation is a basis for the conviction that God is not only good but also powerful. Psalm 93 also makes the point.

- 1 *Yhwh reigned, dressed in glory. Yhwh dressed, girded himself in strength.*  
*The world indeed stands firm, not tottering.*
- 2 *Your throne stood firm from the past. You are/were from of old.*
- 3 *Yhwh, rivers lifted up. Rivers lifted up their voice.*

---

<sup>22</sup> In *When on High*, the world comes into being as an incidental result of a conflict in heaven, and the same is true of the origin of humanity in *Atrahasis*. In the Canaanite Baal and Anat poems from Ugarit in Syria, Anat and Baal both speak of having crushed Sea, destroyed Flood, bound the sea dragon (*tnn*), and crushed the sea serpent (*ltn*), the seven-headed power. These are concerned more with the annual victory of the forces of life over the forces of death in nature. It is not clear that they relate to the world's once-for-all coming into being.

*Rivers lift up their pounding*

- 4 *Above the voices of many waters, majestic ones,  
the breakers of the sea, Yhwh in the height is majestic.*  
5 *Your affirmations were established.  
Holiness adorns your house, Yhwh, for long days.*

I follow the Septuagint and the Vulgate in giving the opening phrase its obvious sense “Yhwh reigned”. If the psalm wanted to make a timeless statement such as “Yhwh is king” (NRSV) or “Yhwh reigns” (NIV), then there are ways in which it could have done so more clearly, by using a noun clause or an imperfect verb. The perfect verb suggests that something has happened, as is the case when the verb refers to a human king beginning to reign. Saying that Yhwh’s throne stood firm from the past (*me’az*) (v. 2) makes the same point, for this verb,<sup>23</sup> too, is used of a human king’s gaining firm control of his country at the beginning of his reign (cf 1 Kgs 2:12, 46).

So was there a time when Yhwh did not reign? Psalm 93:2 safeguards that point by declaring that Yhwh, too, is/was from of old. The sentence has no verb, and we might reckon that by its nature this is a statement that should be understood as timeless, or we might reckon that the context points to a past reference. But in the parallelism, the second clause typically goes beyond the first: Yhwh’s throne stands firm from the past, even the distant past, but Yhwh’s person has a much longer history. In other words, “from of old” (*me’olam*) suggests a longer time frame than “from the past”.

Thus Yhwh is glorious “in the height” (*bammarom*), the height of heaven (v. 4). It is there that holiness adorns Yhwh’s house—in the context, Yhwh’s house in heaven. And it will continue to do that “for long days” (v. 5). So Yhwh’s sovereign holiness stands firm back to days of yore and forward as far as the mind can imagine. The Psalm leaves no room for the idea that there has ever been a day when Yhwh did not reign or that there will ever be such a day.

Against the background of that affirmation, it can then declare that there was a moment when Yhwh particularly asserted sovereignty. Perhaps Yhwh was reckoned to do that each year at a celebration of Yhwh’s kingship in Israel’s worship, but there is little specific evidence of that. Passages in Job, the Psalms, and elsewhere rather suggest that we relate the Psalm more specifically to a moment in primeval history when Yhwh flexed muscles and demonstrated power in relation to the self-assertion of other cosmic or metaphysical powers. There was a moment when rivers asserted themselves in an attempt to overwhelm heaven and/or earth.<sup>24</sup> And there was thus a moment in primeval history when God asserted sovereignty, put on majesty, demonstrated power.

That once-for-all demonstration is a basis for conviction about the world’s ongoing security. The world indeed stands firm (v. 1b). As usual, the psalm’s covert agenda appears here. The world does not always appear secure. The psalm’s reference to the floods in the past doubtless conceals a reference to present floods that threaten to overwhelm the community. Psalm 124 makes explicit that attacking nations can be the embodiment of

<sup>23</sup> *kun*, niphāl.

<sup>24</sup> “Rivers” (*neharot*) can denote the streams of the waters under the earth (see e.g., 24:2; 74:15).



such flood. Indeed, I have assumed that this is so here, in translating as present the third reference to the rivers lifting up, where the verb changes from perfect to imperfect.<sup>25</sup> The fact that God asserted sovereignty back then is the assurance that this sovereignty can still operate in the present. Yhwh's affirmations ('*edot*) were firmly established (v. 5).<sup>26</sup>

Winning this victory involved word and wind, and the manifestation of power and insight. It involves a word that rebukes the powers of disorder (Job 26:11; cf Ps 104:7). The word spoken in creation was not only the commissioning word of Genesis 1.<sup>27</sup> It involves the power to still Sea and the insight to defeat Rahab (Job 26:12). It involves God's wind (Job 26:13). That wind calms the heavens according to the traditional understanding of the line, but whatever the meaning, it offers a suggestive contrast with the disturbing effect of the wind in *When on High*.

God won a victory at the Beginning. The life of the world, the life of nations and communities, and the life of individuals make clear that this was not a final victory. They are often characterized by ongoing conflict. The First Testament gospel sees in that a frustrating of God's creative purpose. Things were not meant to be that way, and came to be that way through the course of events. But having determined to achieve something, and having determined to overcome forces of disorder, God stays involved with this story.

Why does the First Testament declare that Yhwh asserted control of the forces of disorder? Presumably we need to work back from what disorder means in human experience.

- A straightforward understanding of some texts suggests they reflect people's awareness of the threat of physical disorder in the world. Perhaps they assumed that the order whereby the sea does not overwhelm a flat coastal area such as Mesopotamia or torrential rain

---

<sup>25</sup> Cf NRSV.

<sup>26</sup> In this context reference to requirements expressed in the Torah seems irrelevant, but this language can also refer to decrees Yhwh made in establishing order in the world. At the beginning of his reign a king often would thus issue decrees for the regulating of his realm, and Marduk does so when becoming heavenly king in *When on High*. The psalm takes up this idea from earthly life and heavenly story and applies it to Yhwh. It refers to the security of the world that issues from decisions Yhwh took and put on record back then.

<sup>27</sup> Genesis 1 also assumes that creation involves speaking, for it comes about through God's speaking an authoritative word of command. It, too, refers to the involvement of a supernatural wind, with some ambiguity over whether this wind is disturbing or quieting. Its very use of the verb "create" stresses the sovereign authority God manifested in making the world. It does also imply that God needed to exercise insight in creating the world, while Wisdom's testimony in Proverbs 8 makes that explicit (cf Prov 3:19-20). In any circumstances God might have needed word and wind and power and insight in order to bring the cosmos into being. The same four realities appear in the description of creation in Jeremiah 10:12-13; 51:15-16. There God is "maker of the earth by his power, establisher of the world by his wisdom, and one who stretched out the heavens by his insight". At the sound of God's voice waters roared in the heavens, and as part of God's creative activity "he brought out the wind from his storehouses". The activity of forces that oppose order implies another reason why God needed these capacities in order to bring into being an orderly world. And God possessed them.

does not overwhelm a more rainy area such as the Judean mountains could not be taken for granted.

- Some psalms speak more of political events and imply that the forces of disorder are political ones. More powerful nations are ever threatening a small people such as Judah.
- Other psalms apply the imagery of disorder and flood to the life of the individual. When people experience personal attack or illness, or when they are cast out of their community, forces of disorder threaten to overwhelm them.
- The story of the flood presupposes that human wrongdoing threatens the secure order of the world. It could lead to the dismantling of that order.

The picture of God defeating forces of disorder is a promise that the world actually is secure from such forces. One might demythologize the account by suggesting that it signifies God's looking in the eye such potential collapse of order and determining that it would not happen. By a determination of God formulated in connection with bringing the world into being, forces of cosmic, political, personal, and moral disorder will not overwhelm the order that God brought about in the world in creating it.

#### (d) God built a home

Why on earth, or why in heaven, might God have wanted to create this world? *When on High* might at first imply no other reason than an unexplained desire to do something with the remains of Tiamat, though it eventually tells us how the creation of the world issues in the building of a house for Marduk. The First Testament is also reticent about the reasons, though a picture it offers does suggest an analogous rationale. It portrays God as like a lordly desert sheikh who spread out the heavens, like a tent, to live in.<sup>28</sup> God creates the world as a home. In due course Israel will build God a splendid tent in the wilderness, and there are hints that this tent mirrors the nature of the universe itself. Perhaps the same is true of the solid, fixed palace that Israel will later build for God. But God's original home is the world itself. By no means can the heavens contain Yhwh, no matter how high they extend, any more than earth can (1 Kings 8:27). Yet Yhwh can make heaven a dwelling place (1 Kings 8:30) from which to be aware of what happens on earth. And Yhwh can even accept the gift of a second home on earth that is known by Yhwh's name (the particular point of 1 Kings 8), like the Queen of England keeping royal palaces in further parts of her realm so that she can stay there from time to time.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Isa 40:22; cf 42:5; 51:13; Job 9:8; Ps 104:2-3.

<sup>29</sup> While working with the image of Yhwh's home as like sheikh's tent, Psalm 104:3 also speaks of it as the fine two-story house of a well-to-do person such as a king. It incorporates not only the regular first floor rooms but also a penthouse (cf Amos 9:6) like that of the indulgent Judean kings, which Jeremiah implies was especially splendid (Jer 22:14). A feature of its prize-winning architectural design is that it is suspended over the waters above the heavenly dome. Yhwh is described as fitting the rooms with beams, presumably the beams that support the floor, either horizontally or vertically. The rooms' location makes them a convenient office space from which to manage the world below (see v. 13). Other aspects of creation then

This suggests a different perspective from *When on High* and from traditional Christian thinking. The latter has taken the view that “This world is not my home; I’m just a-passing through”. Christians have often not felt at home in the world. God apparently does feel at home in the cosmos, and implicitly invites humanity to do the same. Heaven is God’s throne and the earth is the stool on which God’s feet rest. It is a telling fact that the word “heaven” refers both to the sky and to God’s home. Speaking of the cosmos itself as God’s home suggests that this is not merely a matter of analogical language, as if we use a term from within creation simply because we have no direct way of speaking of God’s actual dwelling. While it is no doubt true that the incorporeal God has a metaphorical “dwelling”, the First Testament also implies that the actual heavens and earth are God’s actual home.<sup>30</sup>

But in Job 26:5-7, for instance, this idea that the cosmos is God’s home is not merely (or at all) an invitation to intimacy. Job goes on to make it clear that the arrangements in this home indicate that there is appropriate distance between humanity and God. The clouds that often cover the heavens suggest that God used them to obscure the sight of the divine throne, as they would do when God appeared on earth.<sup>31</sup> The cloud both marks and veils the presence of God. It both signals the fact that human beings live with God in God’s home, and protects them from the threatening aspects of that. In Job, the latter has the emphasis. The same point is made by speaking of heaven as God’s throne and earth of God’s (mere) footstool (Isa 66:1). Yhwh sits way on high and has to peer right down to see what is happening on earth (Ps 113:5-6).<sup>32</sup> “The heavens are heavens for Yhwh, but

---

form the means whereby God effects other aspects of this management. The clouds are Yhwh’s limousine, the winds its means of propulsion, the winds and the lightning Yhwh’s aides and officers (vv. 3-4). Other passages make clear that Yhwh is the architect of this work (Isa 40:12-13) and that in addition to its living accommodation, Yhwh’s palace incorporates extensive storerooms where armory such as floodwater, storms, lightning and hail are kept (e.g., Ps 135:7). It also incorporates a meeting room for Yhwh’s cabinet (e.g., 1 Kings 22:19-22; Job 1—2).

<sup>30</sup> To put it another way, God stretched out Tsaphon over emptiness (*tohu*) and hung the earth over nothing but Sheol and the waters that lie under the earth (Job 26:5-7).<sup>?</sup> Now Tsaphon is a word for the north in Hebrew, but this is ultimately because Mount Tsaphon in the far north on the Mediterranean coast was a well-known place by reason of its significance as a Canaanite holy mountain. It was the place where Baal lived and where the gods assembled (Isa 14:13-14). In Psalm 48 the name is applied polemically to Mount Sion as the real place on earth where God lives. So God’s “stretching out” Tsaphon again refers to God’s making a home. In Job 26:7 the imagery may come from the way a mountain may seem to float in the air over clouds or haze. In such a fashion, God indeed miraculously stretched out the sky as a dwelling tent or canopy under which to set a throne (Ps 11:4). The earth then comprises the suspended floor of this tent. So Yhwh’s holy palace is always in heaven, Yhwh’s throne there the place within creation from which Yhwh can keep an eye on events on earth (Ps 2:4), and take action there (Ps 11:4; cf 14:2; 20:6; 33:13-15). The whole earth belongs to Yhwh as the one who built it securely over the waters below (Ps 24:1-2). The disjunction between heaven and earth did not mean that the God who kept a holy habitation in heaven could not be expected to be involved with earthly ground, land, and produce—rather the opposite (Deut 26:15).

<sup>31</sup> E.g., Exod 19:16; 24:15-16; 40:34-35.

<sup>32</sup> I render “Who is like Yhwh our God (who sits on high, who looks down low) in the heavens and in the earth?” They do not suggest that Yhwh looks down on the

the earth he gave to human beings" (Ps 115:16). Yhwh is like a seminary professor who welcomes some students to live in her house and gives them the first story to live in as they wish (within implicit constraints), but keeps a room or two for herself on the second story. But the students, like the servants in a great house, always have the freedom and security of looking to the professor in her private rooms there when they feel the need to do so (Ps 123:1-2).

Humanity lives in God's home as secure and welcome guests, invited to feel at home here as long as we live. One implication is that we might feel we should be respectful towards God's home, to keep it looking nice and avoid damaging it.

#### 4 Theological history

"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth". In detail and in the outworking of the statement's implications there may be significant differences between this statement of Israel's and the equivalent statements of other middle-eastern peoples, though what they have in common deserves noting. Modern narratives about the world's origins do not begin with God. As we might put it, that is a faith statement.

An Israelite might counter that by commenting that it is also a wise statement, in several senses. Reverence for Yhwh is the first principle of wisdom, after all. While there may be insights on the world that we gain by leaving God out of the picture in the sense of declining to introduce into it too easily an interventionist, supra-naturalist God, there are insights on the world that we lose by leaving God out of the picture altogether. Either tactic involves a faith statement or a faith commitment. To someone in a traditional society, treating God as part of the picture is as natural as leaving God out of the picture is natural for someone in a modern society. Or it is as natural as treating ourselves as part of the picture (as if we could prove that we exist, or that anything outside of ourselves does).

There is a different point to be made. The First Testament does not speak of faith in God as creator, but in another sense Israelites surely recognized that faith was involved in this relationship. To them faith meant trust. It was not only a mental exercise but also a commitment of the whole person. Trust in God as creator and trust in creation is a key underlying theme in statements about creation. What other point could there be to such statements?

Israelites knew that the world could not necessarily be trusted. From time to time it threatened to betray their trust. Their statements about creation were ones they made to reassure themselves that God the creator could be trusted, and that in this sense the world that God had created could be trusted. But trust requires some basis, even if it involves an act of commitment that goes beyond what can be proven.

What do all the First Testament's past tense verbs about creation refer to? For instance, did God really think and laugh, and if so, how do we

---

heavens (which would be an odd notion). Cf L. C. Allen, *Psalms 101-150* (WBC; Waco, TX: 1983).

know? How did the author of Proverbs 8 know that God thought and laughed, and that Ms Wisdom laughed and danced?

If we were able to ask where the “story” in Proverbs 8:22-31 came from, I can think of two possible answers. The author might speak in terms of receiving it by divine revelation, or might speak of developing it by the creativity of human imagination.

This is not to say that in the first case the story would then be true and in the second case, false. Many people who think that they receive divine revelations are wrong, while many products of the human imagination are true. I assume that either way, Proverbs 8 is a true story about the way in which God went about creating the world. And God might have been involved in bringing this story into being by directly giving someone a revelation. Or God might have done so by inspiring them to develop an imaginative parable about the way God thought and laughed, and in this way also convey a true impression of the process God was involved in.

The nature of apocalypses such Revelation in the New Testament is to pass on visions that the author received rather than consciously created. The nature of stories such as the ones Jesus tells is to pass on parables that the author has imaginatively created. The nature of a wisdom book such as Proverbs makes us assume that Proverbs 8 is more like the latter than the former. In Proverbs 8 we are not being given hard factual information about the origin of the world. We are being told a parable.

First Testament study has been more inclined to call such stories “myths”. One trouble with this word is that it is inclined to suggest that they are mere human fabrications with no trustworthy content, not least because this is the implication of the use of the word “myth” in the New Testament. Another trouble with the word “myth” is that it has a whole range of other meanings, some more positive, some less so. John Rogerson wrote a very substantial book on *Myth in Old Testament Interpretation*. If by “myth” we meant a humanly-devised story about the life of the heavenly beings (which might be a theologically reliable guide to the nature of these beings), then we might call Proverbs 8 a myth. “Myth” is (or can be) a theologically serious way of seeking to express theological truth. But it is too late to rehabilitate the word “myth” in the ordinary person’s mind, and I therefore avoid it.

Proverbs 8 is a divinely-inspired but humanly-created parable about the process God was involved in when creating the world. Our task in asking after its theological significance is to tease out the theological significance of the story without abandoning its narrative way of doing theology.

The same is true of the other material in scripture about creation and the early history of the world, whether this comes in books such as Job and the Psalms, or in Genesis. Nowhere do the authors claim to be giving us divine revelation, and nowhere are we reading an account that corresponds to what a camcorder might have captured. They are passing on the results of divinely-inspired human reflection and imagination.

At least, I assume this is so. I do not imagine that the microphone could have captured the snake’s words to Eve or that the wedding photographer could have photographed the weddings of the heavenly beings and the human women in Genesis 6. It may well be that the papers reported

the murder that lies behind Genesis 4 and that the television news led with a weather report on the storms that lie behind Genesis 7. But if so, the story of the event that they reported has been turned into a story of much greater significance. It has come to be part of a theological history. The story that the narrative in Genesis 1—11 tells is theologically true. It tells the truth about God and about the world and about humanity. And in some sense in order to be theologically true, it also has to be historically true. Genesis 1 is not a scientific account of creation, whatever that means, but neither is it a story with no historical reference. It does make some claims about the world's origins, about the way the world came into being.

For instance, Genesis 1 tells us that God created the world in an orderly and systematic way. It expresses that by portraying God creating the world over six days, setting out a framework over the first three days and filling in this framework in the second three. I do not believe that historically God created the world over six days. That is a parabolic way of making the point. But the point made by means of the parable is (among others) that God created the world in an orderly, systematic way. That is itself a historical statement, a statement about something that happened. In this sense, Proverbs or Job or the Psalms or Genesis needs to be historically true. To put it in other words, there are two ways of speaking of creation within the First Testament and among the documents of other middle-eastern cultures. There are writings that focus on the world's and humanity's current relationship with God, and there are also writings that give a narrative account of how those relationships came to be what they are. It is not obvious that the latter are simply a disguised version of the former. The claim that this is what they are involves an allegorical reading of the narrative texts, a reading that introduces ideas from outside them in order to take them for something other than they are.